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Life

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



JULY, 1969

VOL. 25, NO. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

CAUSE FOR MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

He was through, without hope. Death by flame—or hanging—one way or the other he was done. Could Mike Shayne free a twice-doomed man—with one deadly gamble left?

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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 25, No. 2, July 1969. Published monthly by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. 56 W. 45th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10036. Subscriptions, One Year (12 issues) \$6.00; Two Years (24 issues) \$12.00; single copies 50 cents. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. © 1969, by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright conventions. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster—return 3579 to 56 W. 45th Street, New York, New York. 10036.

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To die, it is not easy. But to live on, with the scar of murder branded on your soul and in your heart—may not that be the worst of all?

WHERE AM I?

by JACK RITCHIE

MIKE AND I watched him for about fifteen minutes.

"He's not doing anything," Mike said. "Just standing there."

I threw away my cigarette. "Let's go over and talk to him."

He was a tall, gaunt man who stood to one side, not interfering with the flow of customers in and out of the department store.

I showed my badge. "Are you especially interested in anything across the street?"

His eyes returned to the people passing. "No."

"Like that jewelry store?" I asked.

"No."

"The manager thinks you are," Mike said. "It worried him enough so that he called us."

"He wasted a dime."

"How long have you been standing here?" I asked.

For a while I didn't think he was going to do us the favor of answering, but then he said, "Since nine."

"I mean how many days?"

Now he looked at me. "None of your business."

Mike took the cigar out of his mouth. "According to the manager, you've been standing in this same spot for the last three days. He thinks you might be planning some kind of surprise for his store."

"Tell him to stop worrying."

I patted him down and found a .45 automatic in his topcoat pocket.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He didn't say anything.

"Let's see your wallet," Mike

said firmly first."

He hesitated. He was told.

Mike looked at him. "Well, your body name comes from you back to
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let," Mike

said firmly. "Take your money out first."

He hesitated, but then did as he was told.

Mike looked through the billfold. "Well, you got the wallet of somebody named James Ryker and he comes from Madison. What brings you back to this spot day after day?"

"That's my business.

I put the .45 into my coat pocket. "You'd better come along with us."

He glared. "On what charge?"

"Carrying a concealed weapon. Does that seem strong enough to you?"

At headquarters, Mike dropped off at the communications center, while I took Ryker up to one of the empty interrogation rooms. I pointed

to a stack of magazines. "Sit down and help yourself. You might be here sometime."

I read a couple of articles myself before Mike joined us again.

Mike is a comfortably fed man with child-sincere eyes. He unwrapped a fresh cigar. "According to the Madison police, James Ryker is an engineer with Drahne Electronics in that city and lives at 416 Fennel Street. One week ago he reported that his wife Magda was missing. When they investigated, they found that she was last seen leaving Ryker's home carrying two suitcases. She got into a sedan parked at the curb and the man at the wheel, according to a witness, wasn't her husband."

Ryker's face darkened.

Mike studied him. "The Madison police say that you claim you don't know who the man was."

Ryker's temper broke.

"I don't. I never even knew that he existed."

Mike deciphered a line in his notebook. "The witness, who happens to be a neighbor, says the sedan had Wisconsin license plates. She remembers the last three numbers because they were all the same—444." He looked up. "Would you please empty your pockets on the table there."

Ryker glared, but did as he was told.

Mike picked up an envelope from the pile and pulled out the plain notepaper.

I read over his shoulder.

Jim, I'm sorry it had to end this way. Don't bother to look for me. I wouldn't come back under any circumstances.

Magda

Mike examined the envelope. "Post-marked here in Milwaukee, four days ago." He looked at Ryker. "Am I guessing wild when I say that you're out to get her? Or him? Or *both* of them?"

Ryker picked up a magazine and decided to get interested in printing.

Mike and I left him sitting there and went into the hall for a conference.

"She must have kept her love life a deep dark secret Mike said." If he really doesn't have any idea who the man is, "So now his only bet is to stand on a street corner in Milwaukee and hope that some day he'll see her pass? Those are pretty long odds."

"Maybe, and maybe not. How often do you figure the average woman goes downtown to shop?"

"Once a month?" Mike speculated.

"So if Ryker stands on the busiest corner downtown and waits, there's a good chance that he'll see his wife sometime. In a month. Two months. Any time."

"If she's in Milwaukee. Suppose she was just passing through and that's how come the letter was post-marked from here."

"Maybe. But this is all that Ryker's got to work on and he's doing it. He may be right."

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"Reporters"

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"So what do we do? Taking away his automatic isn't the answer. If he's really got his mind set, all he has to do is walk into any gun shop and buy himself another one."

I agreed. "We'll have to find her before he does. I don't suppose Madison made up a list of license plates ending in 444?"

"I doubt it. This is just a runaway wife thing as far as they're concerned. Ninety-five percent of the time they come back within a week and so there's no point in working up sweat unless something serious develops. But knowing what we know do, we'd better get in touch with the Motor Vehicle Department."

Mike went back downstairs to the communications center and I rejoined Ryker.

I sat down. "So there you were, standing on that corner on the off-chance that some day you'd see your wife again? Were you going to shoot her down on the spot?"

He firmly turned a page of his magazine.

"How long were you going to stay on that corner?" I asked. "Months? Years? Suppose she isn't even in Milwaukee? You'd be making one big public fool out of yourself, wouldn't you? And what are you going to tell the reporters?"

That made him look up. "Reporters? What reporters?"

"They'll smell out this story," I said. "They'll get a look at the blotter and ask me what it's all



about. They will want all of the details."

Ryker ran his tongue over his lips.

I took a slow puff from my cigarette. "Your friends, your relatives, they'll think you're some kind of a nut, now, won't they?"

I let time tick away and I could see that he was working up to some kind of a decision.

Finally he swallowed. He did a pretty good job of making his eyes look blank. "Where am I? Who am I?"

Mike opened the door and came in. "How are things?"

"He just developed amnesia," I said.

Mike sighed. "Another one? That makes fourteen this year."

"They all think they're being original," I said. "When they get backed into a corner they all think a nice case of amnesia will explain everything." I clicked my tongue. "It's the coward's way out, Ryker. The coward's way. You got to stand up and face reality."

Ryker flushed and looked away.

Mike frowned in my direction. "Sometimes I think you push a little too hard, Bill." He turned back to Ryker. "You don't really have amnesia, now do you?"

"No," Ryker snapped.

Mike nodded approvingly. "Well, we got that much settled. And now, in your own words, can you tell us just why you were standing on that corner?"

Ryker's lips tightened. "I'm not saying another damn thing."

And that was that, as far as Ryker was concerned. We tried, but he wasn't doing any more talking.

Mike finally sighed and looked out of the window at the gray sky. "Looks like it might snow. Hope the stuff stays on the ground."

He was thinking about tracking and the deer season starting tomorrow.

"No," Mike said. "I don't care much for night driving. I'll start the first thing in the morning."

Our phone buzzed and it was Communications saying that it had the list from the Motor Vehicle Department.

I left Mike and Ryker and went downstairs.

At Communications I picked up the list and as I riffled through the pages, I found a grin and an idea forming.

I sat down at one of the typewriters and added another name to the list.

Back upstairs, I sat down and lit a cigarette. I turned a page, studied it, and then looked up. "Ever been to Madison, Mike?"

"Sure," he said. "Off and on. Got a sister who lives there. Thought I told you that."

"Know where Fennel Street is?" "Yeah."

I took a few puffs on the cigarette before I spoke again. "You drive a sedan, don't you?"

He looked at me, slightly puzzled. "You know it. Why?"

I shrugged. "What's your license number?"

He gave it a second's thought. "Damn if I remember."

I shook my head. "And you a cop. Suppose somebody stole your car?"

He scratched his head. "Who remembers his license plate number? Even cops. I'd have to look it up somewhere."

Once again I silently scanned the sheets.

"Why the questions?"

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I ground out my cigarette in the ashtray. "Your name happens to be on this list. I guess your license plate ends in 444."

He came over and stared at the spot where my finger pointed.

"Just a coincidence," I said. "I'll cross it off."

"Sure," Mike said.

I picked up a pencil, but then hesitated. "Mike, just for the record, where were you on the afternoon of November 16th?"

His eyes went to the wall calendar. "That was my regular day off."

Ryker had been listening and now his eyes narrowed. "Fennel Street is only four blocks long. Not many people outside of Madison ever heard of it."

Mike colored slightly. "Cross my name off, Bill. It's just a coincidence. There are six hundred other people on that list."

I agreed and elaborately eliminated his name.

Ryker got to his feet. "Just because he's a cop, you think that he couldn't be the one?"

I regarded him coldly. "Look, mister, I've known Mike for years. He's straight as they come. Now sit down."

There was silence for a while.

"So my license plate ends in 444," Mike said. That could happen to anybody. And millions of people drive sedans."

I nodded.

Mike seemed a little warm. "So I go to Madison every once in a while

and I know where Fennel Street is. It's a free country."

Ryker stared at him for a while and then got to his feet again. "Book me or something. I'm tired of sitting here."

I glanced at my watch. Nearly five.

"All right," I said.

We took Ryker downstairs and had him booked on the concealed gun charge. He gave his address as the Crestview Hotel and was released on a five hundred dollar bond.

We walked him to the street.

"The smart thing to do, Ryker," I said, "is to go back to Madison and forget the whole project."

He almost created a smile. "And forfeit my bond? Is a cop giving me that kind of advice?" He buttoned his topcoat and regarded Mike stonily. "I'd swear I saw you some place before."

Mike flushed again. "Not that I know of."

We watched Ryker go. When he crossed Tenth Street, Acting Detective Klein stepped out of a doorway and followed inconspicuously half a block behind.

At five, Mike and I signed out and walked to the municipal parking lot.

When we got to his car, he stopped and scratched his head. "Hey, my license plate doesn't end in 444!"

I showed innocent interest. "Really? Are you positive that's your car?"

"Well, sure," he said, a little

uncertainly. "I mean there's that dent in the left fender and that gouge on the side there—" He stopped as he caught my grin.

For the third time in the last half an hour, his face reddened. He sputtered for ten seconds before he could talk. "One of these days one of those jokes of yours is going to backfire."

The next morning a cold mist covered the city when I checked in at headquarters.

Sergeant Peters, Mike's replacement for the weekend, sat at our desk studying a report. "This guy Ryker bought himself a pistol at the Acme Sports Shop right after he left here yesterday. And ammunition."

I rapped a pack of cigarettes out of the carton in our desk. "So what did Klein do about that?"

"What could he do? It's not against the law to buy a gun. And Ryker carried it away from the store in a sealed box, so that doesn't qualify it as a concealed weapon." He glanced at the report again. "Ryker had a meal at Mader's Restaurant and then made a phone call. Klein thinks he came out of the phone booth smiling, but he isn't sure."

I tried to imagine Ryker smiling and I could see why Klein wasn't certain.

Peters put down the report. "Anyway, Ryker left Mader's and that's when Klein lost him."

I paused in the act of lighting my cigarette. "Lost him?"

"It happens sometimes. It was one of those downtown bargain nights and there were crowds and the next thing Klein knew Ryker disappeared."

"Maybe he went back to his hotel?"

"That's what Klein thought. So he went over to the Crestview and waited. But Ryker didn't show up. Still hasn't."

"So now Ryker's wandering around somewhere with a loaded gun?"

Peters nodded. "And looking for his wife."

Or somebody else, I thought.

I reached for my desk phone, but then decided I wanted my call to be private.

"Be back in a minute," I said.

Out in the hall, I stepped into a phone booth and pulled the door shut. I dialed Mike's number and got his landlady on the line.

"Is Mike still there?" I asked.

"Why no," she said. "He left last night."

I felt some relief that Mike was out of the city, but I said, "He told me he wasn't leaving until this morning."

She might have shrugged. "Didn't say anything to me about his plans and I can't read his mind. Maybe he decided to leave last night because the weather was holding good and the weatherman promised rain for today."

I was about to hang up, but then she said, "He left right after getting a

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telephone call. He was supposed to meet somebody. The name was Wyker, I think."

Wyker? "Could it have been Ryker?"

"That might be it. I remember hearing the name mentioned while Mike was on the phone. I don't like to listen too hard to other people telephone calls."

The telephone booth seemed a little warm. "What time did Mike leave?"

"About seven."

"Alone?"

"From here, at least."

"Did he say exactly where he was going?"

"Not when he left. But I do know that he was planning to go hunting up near River Falls."

"Did he mentioned a hotel or motel?"

"Not to me. I suppose there must be dozens around there."

I thanked her and hung up.

River Falls? That was at least two hundred fifty miles north. Mike would get his car gassed up and checked before he left on a trip like that. Didn't he usually go to the station on Twenty-third and Atkinson? Bill's Standard?

I went to the yellow pages of the telephone book and discovered eight Bill's Standards, but narrowed that down by checking the addresses.

When the Bill I wanted answered the phone, I identified myself as a friend of Mike's. "Did he stop there last night?"

Bill gave the question thought. "Yeah. Going hunting, I think. Filled his tank and gave him a quart of oil. He was with this other guy."

"Other guy? What did he look like?"

"I didn't pay any particular attention. Kind of thin and lanky looking. Neither one of them got out of the car."

I hung up and went back to Sergeant Peters. I rubbed my forehead. "I feel like hell today. Got the flu bug or something."

He looked me over without too much interest. "You don't look sick."

"But I feel that way. I need a bed and aspirins." I left him for the captain's office and tried to look sicker while I talked the captain into letting me have the day off.

It was raining when I sprinted across the parking lot to my car. I was soaked by the time I unlocked it and got in.

River Falls. I tried to remember what Mike had told me about his trips up there before.

How did I know that Mike got to River Falls at all?

I began sweating.

Wouldn't it be simpler for Ryker just to kill him and dump the body outside of town?

I didn't want to believe that.

No. Not if Ryker wanted to find his wife too and he thought Mike knew where she was. He'd have to get that information out of Mike and Mike would remain alive just as long

as Ryker thought he had that information.

Where would he take Mike?

What better place than north? Where it is quiet. Where they could be alone.

I turned the ignition key and pulled out of the lot.

Fifteen minutes later I was on the inter-state, heading north.

Sudden gusts of wind almost took the car off the road and I had to play the wheel with a firm hand.

My cigarettes were brown with damp and the collar of my wet suit began to chafe my neck.

The miles dragged on and the weather got no better.

Two hours later, I was finishing my last straw-tasting cigarette when I saw the turn-off for Jefferson City and the sign, *Gas, Food, Lodging. Next Turn Right.*

Jefferson City?

Hadn't Mike mentioned this place? Didn't he say that he usually stopped here for a sandwich and coffee? The halfway break?

I slowed to ramp speed and took the right turn. Under the inter-state I found a gas station and a diner.

I parked the car and waited for a break in the rain, but there wasn't any sign of a let-up. Finally I made a dash for the diner.

Inside, I stayed on the rubber mat and let the water drain off my clothes.

The place was empty of customers and the counter-man was reading a newspaper.

He looked my way. "Looks like we're camped under a waterfall."

I nodded and told him who I was looking for.

He shook his head. "The name doesn't ring any bell. But then I don't know the names of even ten percent of the regular customers. This is a business of faces, hellos and goodbyes."

"He was going north to River Falls," I said. "Probably wearing an orange jacket. And I think his cap was orange too."

That stirred his memory. "Orange? Yeah. There was an orange in here last night. I remember noticing because almost everybody around here still sticks with red." He thought about it. "And he fit your description. A little on the heavy side and a cigar smoker."

"Was he alone?"

He rubbed his jaw. "It's coming back now. No. He was with a kind of tall man. They ordered a couple bags of take-out hamburgers."

I sloshed back to the car.

So Mike had made it this far.

I got the windshield wipers working and followed the ramp back up to the interstate.

The wind pulled at the car again and I found that fifty was the most I could do if I wanted to stay on the road. On valleys in the highway I had to do even less as the car wallowed through inches of water.

The miles dragged on with the rain stopped for five minutes, ten minutes, and then rushing down

again in view. I travel slow.

When I Falls turn-off afternoon.

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At the first Mike's side

I turned parked near end of the units.

I got out with cold I parked in front

I took I turned the carefully, a room was empty

I moved in there either side of the

River Falls shallow wooded hill

My eyes leading away and there trees, but I ing up the n



again in vicious, heavy sheets making travel slow.

When I finally reached the River Falls turn-off, it was after two in the afternoon.

I put in another five miles on a narrow two-lane country road before I came to the road sign, *River Falls, pop. 257*.

The rain diminished to a drizzle as I slowed the car to a crawl and peered at the first motel on the right hand side of the road. No. Mike's car wasn't among those parked there.

I put pressure on the accelerator and drifted to the next motel. Not here either.

At the fourth motel, I saw it.

Mike's sedan.

I turned into the driveway and parked near the bar-restaurant at one end of the semi-circle of the motel units.

I got out of my car, my legs stiff with cold and wet. Mike's car was parked in front of unit number nine.

I took my .38 out of its holster, turned the door knob slowly and carefully, and stepped inside. The room was empty.

I moved to the bathroom. No one in there either. I stepped back outside of the unit.

River Falls was located in a shallow valley surrounded by wooded hills.

My eyes found an obvious path leading away from the motel. Here and there it disappeared into the trees, but I could still trace it winding up the nearest hill.

I caught my breath. That spot of orange near the top of the hill. The orange moved.

There were two figures up there. I could just make that out now. They were near the top and still moving up.

I jogged down the muddy trail. After a bit it began to rise into the side of the hill and I had to slow to a walk. Patches of water here and there made the going even rougher.

My dress shoes gave almost no grip on the slanting path. I slipped, fell, and slid down the slope, grasping at the bushes and eventually coming to a stop in a muddy gulley.

I remained there half a minute, regaining my breath. Then I wiped the mud off my face with a sleeve and fought my way back up to the path.

I looked up the side of the hill again. For a moment I saw nothing in the drizzle and then I caught another glimpse of them before they disappeared into the trees.

I dabbed a wet handkerchief at the gash of my face and moved forward again. After five minutes of effort, I was gasping for breath. And then I heard it.

A shot.

My eyes went to the summit of the hill. I could make out one figure now. Just one. I saw no orange.

It was over. I took a deep breath. I could go up after him. Or could I wait right here for him to come down.

But suppose he went over the ridge and tried to get away by that route? I took another tired breath. This was business for the state cops now.

I turned and made my way slowly back to the motel.

Inside the barroom, the half a dozen customers turned and stared at me. The bartender's eyes widened too and I thought I detected fear. From the doorway to the room just beyond the bar, I could hear the click of pool balls.

I made my way to the public phone booth and pulled the door shut after me. I wiped the mud off my fingers with the wet handkerchief and found a dime in my sodden pants pockets.

I hesitated. State Police Headquarters? The county sheriff? No. I'd better dial headquarters in

Milwaukee first and let the department know what had happened.

I made the long distance call and got Captain Harrison. He was surprised to hear my voice. "I thought you were in bed sick? Where are you calling from?"

The outside door to the barroom opened. Two State Troopers strode in and approached the bar. The bartender leaned forward, talking to them, and then pointed in my direction.

The troopers pulled the pistols from their holsters and cautiously approached the booth.

I spoke into the mouthpiece. "Captain, Ryker just—"

One of the troopers motioned for me to come out of the booth.

Captain Harrison's voice came from the ear piece. "Ryker? Did you hear about it? It's all wrapped up."

"Wrapped up?"

"Right," Harrison said. "Ryker took the seven o'clock train back to Madison last night."

"What?"

"Sure," he said. "The Madison police filled us in. It seems that last night Ryker made a phone call back to his mother in Madison and discovered that his wife had changed her mind and decided to return. He hopped the first train he could get back to Madison."

The receiver was damp in my hand. "What about the other man?"

"The other man was her brother. She stayed at his house in Milwaukee thinking things over and decided to

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come back and give the marriage another try."

One of the troopers pulled open the phone booth door. "All right, mister. Come out of there with your hands up!"

I could still hear Captain Harrison's voice. "What the hell's going on at your end of the line?"

I hung up the receiver and stepped out the booth with my hands up.

Behind the troopers, the bartender spoke. "I saw him park outside and pull out this gun. He went into number nine and then back out again and up the side of the hill. I don't figure it. He looks nuts to me."

The front door opened again and a red-jacketed hunter looked in. "The O'Leary brothers just got themselves a buck up the side of the hill not more than ten minutes ago."

But the barroom wasn't particularly interested in his information. All eyes remained on me.

The click of the pool balls in the next room stopped and Mike

appeared in the doorway, a pool cue in his hand. He was alive and well. And dry and warm. He always had been.

And there beside him stood one of his neighbors, Joe Wyker. Hell, I'd even played cards with him once. Wyker, Ryker. Ryker, Wyker.

Damn.

Mike's mouth dropped. "Bill, what the hell are you doing up here? You look like you been sleeping in a muddy ditch for the last week or so."

And Mike was even wearing carpet slippers.

I closed my eyes.

It was just too much. Everything was closing in on me. There was too much to explain. But they were all waiting.

I would have to tell them something. Someday. But until then—

I opened my eyes and gazed around vacantly.

"Where am I?" I asked plaintively. "What's my name? Who am I?"

In the Next Issue:

Another TRUE CRIME STORY Masterpiece

LUCKY LUCIANO

THE MURDEROUS GANGSTER

by DAVID MAZROFF